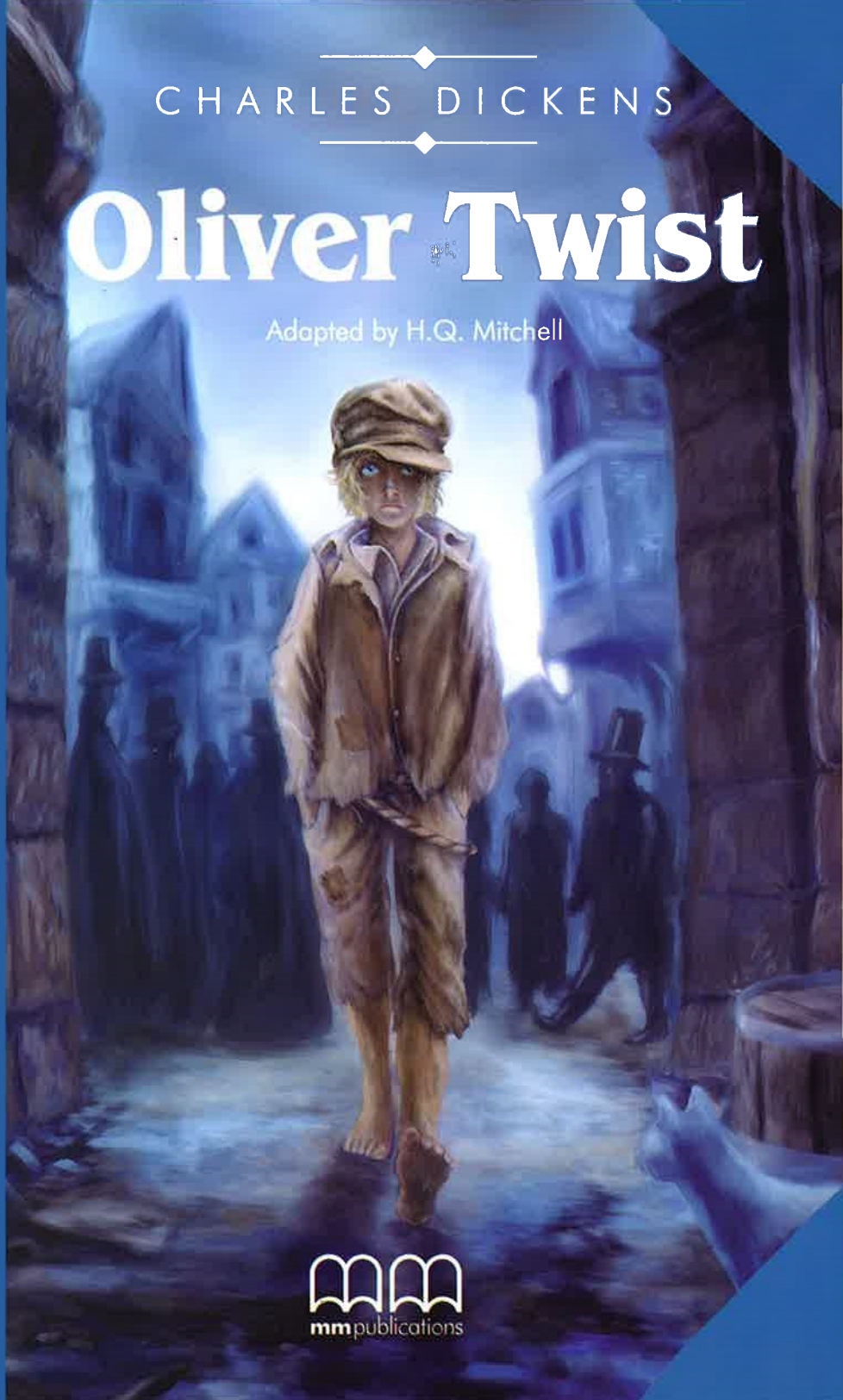


TOP READERS

CHARLES DICKENS

Oliver Twist

Adapted by H.Q. Mitchell



level
3


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Introduction

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) is considered one of the greatest writers in the English language. He is most famous for his vivid characters and his criticism of the injustices of society. Among his best-known works are *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *A Christmas Carol*.

Dickens' own experiences influenced his novels. His early childhood was happy. He spent a lot of time outdoors and loved to read. However, Dickens' father went deeply into debt, and as a result was sent to the debtor's prison, a common practice at the time. At the age of twelve young Charles went to work in a factory to help support his family. His job was pasting labels onto jars of polish. These experiences gave Dickens understanding and sympathy for the working poor. Later, in his novels, he tried to draw attention to their suffering.

When he was older Dickens began work as a law clerk, but he disliked lawyers too much to have a career in the law. Instead, he became a journalist in his early twenties. Through this work he became a writer and published his first book when he was twenty-four. He also married and had ten children.

Oliver Twist was Dickens' second novel. He wrote it to draw attention to the social evils and injustices of his time, such as poverty, hypocrisy, and greed. Oliver is a penniless orphan in 1830s England. How he is treated by various people reveals a lot about his society. He is frequently mistreated by those who are only interested in their own gain. However, other people show Oliver kindness and compassion. Through the lives of his characters, Dickens shows the importance of love towards one's fellow man, whether rich or poor.

Oliver Twist has inspired a lot of film and television adaptations the earliest of which was a silent film back in 1909. A very successful British musical, *Oliver!*, has also been based on the book.

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CHAPTER 1

SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND THERE WAS A SMALL TOWN, WHICH was much like all the other small towns around the year 1830. In the middle of this town was a building called the workhouse. It was a plain brick building for very poor people. Here they could find shelter or food if they were starving, but only the hungriest and most desperate went there. In the workhouse, a baby boy had just been born. It wasn't clear if the baby would live, because he was having trouble breathing. But after a struggle, the baby breathed, sneezed, and then started to cry as loud as he could.

A young woman raised her pale face from the pillow. In a low voice she said: "Let me see the child, and then die."

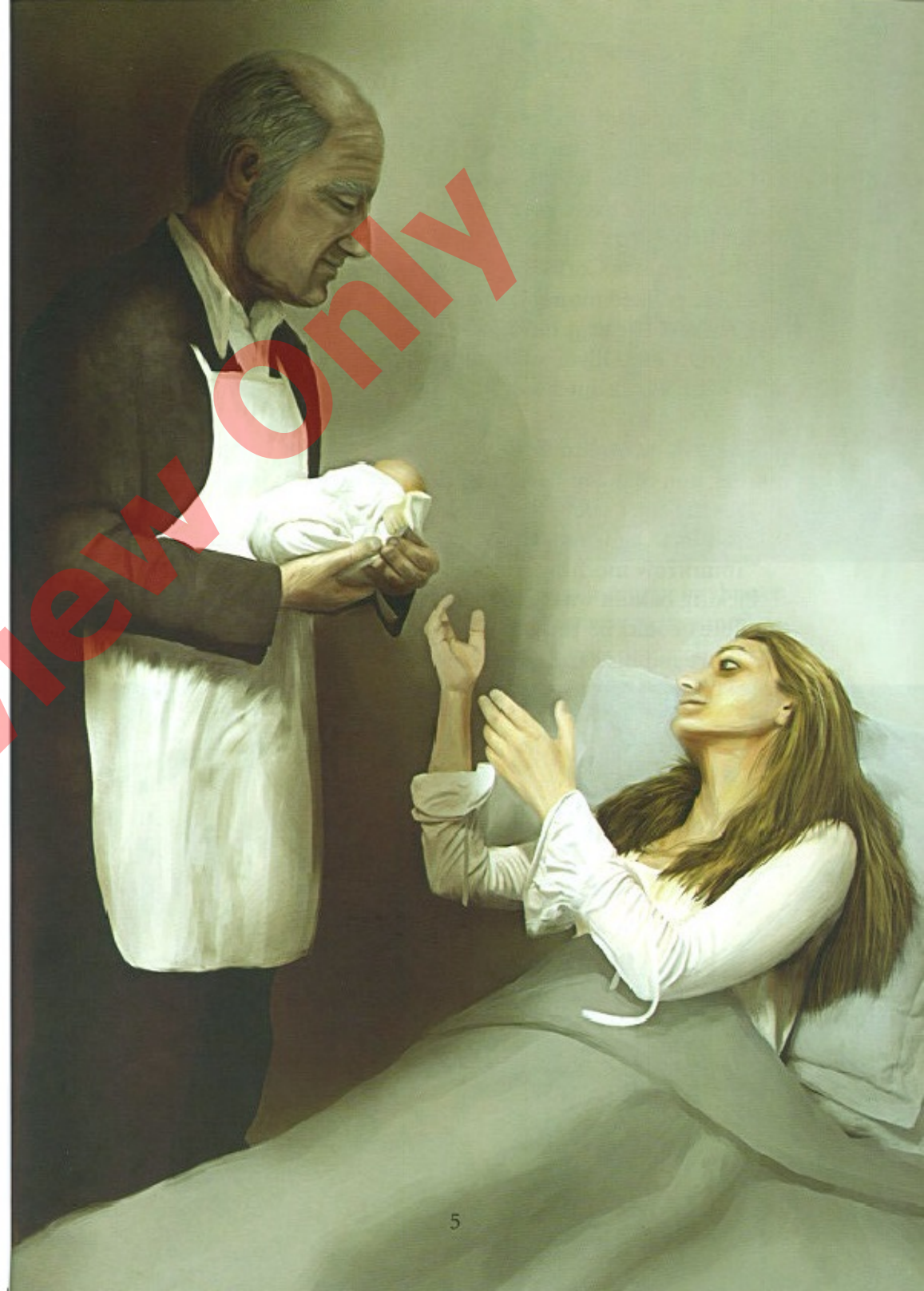
"Oh, you must not talk of dying yet!" said the doctor kindly, as he took the baby and gave him to his mother. She kissed her son's forehead with her cold lips. The doctor saw that she was very weak, and left the room to get some more medicine. Meanwhile, the young woman took a gold locket from around her neck, and gave it to the nurse.

"This is the only thing I own," she said. "You must give it to my son when he is older." Then she took one last look at her baby, shivered, and fell back – dead!

Curious, the nurse looked at the locket. She opened it, and saw two locks of hair, and a gold wedding ring. The name "Agnes" was written inside the ring, but there was no last name. When she heard the doctor returning, she quickly dropped the gold locket into her pocket.

"It is all over," the doctor said, after a glance at the young mother. "She was a good-looking woman. Who was she? Where did she come from?"

"She was found lying in the street last night," replied the nurse. "Her shoes were worn out from walking. But we don't know her name, or where she came from, or where she was going." The nurse didn't say anything about the gold locket in her pocket.



The matron of the workhouse picked two letters from the alphabet, O and T, and named the boy Oliver Twist. If the baby had known what his life would be like at the workhouse, he would probably have cried even louder. He was just one of many babies born there, often without names. The government gave the matron, Mrs Corney, a little money to feed each child. But Mrs Corney liked money much more than she liked the miserable children and she kept most of the money for herself.

By the time Oliver was ten years old, he was very thin and short, with a pale but sweet face. One day Mrs Corney called him to speak to him.

"You know you're an orphan – that you have no father or mother, and that you have been brought up by us here?"

"Yes ma'am," said Oliver, shaking with fear.

"You must be taught a useful trade," said the matron.

"Tomorrow morning, you will begin picking oakum."

Picking oakum was taking apart old ropes from ships, so that the fibres could be reused. It was very hard work and Oliver's back hurt and his hands were covered in blisters all the time.



Working all day meant that Oliver was even hungrier by dinner time. However, Mrs Corney had found another way to save money. This was to add a lot of water to the soup. Every day each boy in the orphanage was only allowed one bowl of that watery soup. Oliver was starving. He picked up his empty bowl and went to the cook.

"Please sir, I want some more," he said.

The whole room fell silent. "What!" the cook finally said, angrily. Nobody had ever dared ask for more.

"Please sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."

The man couldn't say a word. He hit Oliver on the head with the ladle and rushed out to Mrs Corney's office.

"Ungrateful child!" shouted the matron when she was informed about the incident. "That boy will be hanged one day. Lock him up in the basement!"

It was also decided that Oliver would be sent to work as an apprentice. Mrs Corney wanted him away from the workhouse as soon as possible.

The boy, however, had other plans – he was going to run away to London.

CHAPTER 2

ONE COLD MORNING OLIVER GOT UP VERY EARLY AND LEFT the workhouse. Looking back from time to time, he walked quickly and did not stop for five miles. He had only a penny and a piece of bread, but he didn't care. In London a boy could earn his own living. London was seventy miles away, but Oliver kept walking. When night came, he went into a meadow and slept under a hay-stack.

The next few days were the same. Oliver's penny bought him one small loaf, but soon he was hungry again. The only food he had eaten in days was some bread and cheese a kind old woman had given him. On the seventh day, Oliver came to a little town. His feet were bleeding and they were covered in dust. Exhausted, he sat down on a step. Hours later, when he looked up, he saw a rather strange boy standing in front of him. He was about thirteen, short for his age, and very dirty. He wore a man's hat and coat, and although he was young, he looked like he knew how to take care of himself.

He spoke to Oliver. "Hello my covey! What's the row?" Oliver didn't understand, but he guessed the boy was asking how he was.

"I am very hungry and tired," said Oliver. "I have been walking for seven days." Tears came into his eyes as he spoke.

"Walking for seven days!" exclaimed the boy. "Well, you need to eat. I haven't got much money, but it's enough for some food, my friend. As for my name, they call me the Artful Dodger."

After the Artful Dodger had bought some ham and bread, he asked Oliver where he was going. When he said he was going to London, he asked if he had anywhere to stay there. Oliver said no.

"I know a respectable old gentleman there who will give you a place to live, and food to eat, and not ask for any money at all," the Dodger said.

Oliver had not slept under a roof for a week, so this offer sounded good to him. When they got to London, the Dodger led Oliver along a narrow, muddy street with old and dirty houses.

